

Transcript of a Becoming Sheep audio recording.

Interview by journalist Mads Bernhardt Jensen with Charlotte Grum in a camper van,
a cold day in October 2015.

(Translation from Danish into English by Charlotte Grum, January 2019)

For some hours, radio journalist Mads Bernhardt Jensen joined No. 2 and I, letting his questions and my answers interweave with the sound of the wind, the sound of grass being walked in and eaten, creating an intimate 'live' intra-action, caught on his tape recorder. These raw tapes he later sent me.

Later, after having lead No. 2 to her paddock, Mads and I crawled into the small campervan, continuing the exchange from the heath:

Mads (M): Well, now we have been out walking, but we don't pay attention to that. Let's talk as if we are still walking, then I can add something (sound from the walking) under if needed.. It won't make much of a difference.

Charlotte (C): You have to remove the slurping sounds.. (we were having coffee)

M: Exactly. I think we start off by the standard questions. Will you please tell me about the background for doing this project?

C: Yes. My project is a part of the group Exhibition Efterkommere (Descendants) in Kunstpakhuset in Ikast (Danish town). This project would not have been born, had I not been invited to join this exhibition. We are 8 female artists each giving an interpretation and a new narrative of the story of Jomfru Rist who lived on the heath, by herself, here in Hammerum Herred (Shire), 150 years ago. She has a memorial stone out there, where I walk with the sheep.

We met around this woman's fate, which we found interesting and wanted to 'update' and reflect in our current lives.

M: The work you have chosen is to bring No. 2 out there and walk in this suit, as we talked about earlier (on another tape). But will you please tell why you chose to do something with a sheep, and not only a sheep, but an animal, instead of doing something on your own or with others?

C: I'd like to start somewhere else. Originally, the idea was to make something with myself and my own body, that is, in the beginning I had the idea to build some sort of wooden construction, a cover or a shelter out there on the heath. I imagined starting naked, with bare skin and without any artefacts. I imagined activating the local ground of resources I sense is out there and which I assume was there, when Jomfru Rist was living there. That is, all the human resources and dynamics existing out there. I would have built a wooden construction and placed myself out there naked, expecting people to bring me clothing and food along the way.

A parallel-displaced refugee situation is what I think right now. A self-chosen exile.

In some way to bring or to show basically how social we are, also if you as a human place/displace (the Danish verb 'udsætte' plays on a double meaning of both being placed outside and place yourself in a

vulnerable position) yourself outside national law and order even today. So, this was the original thought.

Practically I had to ask the Herning municipality for permission to make the project as well as a local plantation board. And because the area is protected, they said I was very welcome to make something out there, but it had to be temporary and nothing stationary. I then had to develop the idea further and consider how I in another way could animate the landscape, animate the local area. Some other project ideas came up, but it ended up with me being inspired by the memorial stone placed out there, saying: Jomfru Rist lived here in solitude around the 1880's.

I have read books about her saying she lived out here with sheep, a cow, dogs and hens. And then I began to reflect upon how on earth... What kind of view of human nature the people raising this memorial stone have had, since the judgment or the memory of her becomes her living there in solitude.

Why is it not another tale being told? Why was it not the social heritage breaker (mønsterbryder in Danish), that she came from the wealthy Northern Zealand ending on the heath having to cultivate soil for example, why is it not this tale?

I felt like challenging this underlying idea that she lived there in solitude when at the same time she had her house full of animals. This was a discrepancy I wanted to....

M: I just adjust the microphone; it's no problem (I moved closer to the microphone while talking)

C: Besides, it's funny, something happens when I have an active listener...

M: Precisely, now you are a psychologist, but sometimes it can be almost therapeutically to talk to a journalist because most of the time we just listen. But it is funny that you say this about her living in solitude but it was not so much concerning her as a woman living by herself on the heath that you... now I might use a cliché, but it was not so much the story about the woman and the sheep that you wanted to tell.. Could you please tell what was the underlying...

C: Yes... For some years, I have been inspired by post humanist philosophy, which is about replacing the very individualist view of the human subject with a relational view of the human subject. That's really the fast version of it. This is something I have internalized, been inspired by and realize puts words to many of the feelings, thoughts and impulses I have tried to express in my other art projects, where I have tried to repeal the difference between architecture and body for example, that is – my human body. I have made some works where they melt together.

So this sheep project is a part of this investigation of how I as an artist in new ways express this very interweaved relationship between materiality, or landscapes or surroundings on one hand and living body, human or subject on the other hand. That is the back ground story so when I met this stone, I thought how could I express these thoughts in a work where I equate myself or move towards an animal, a non-human animal, calling myself a human animal, I wanted to go into some sort of connection. I wanted to explore what happens when we move together over time, as it is unusual to make a 5-week long project where a sort of rubbing off happens between the first creature and the other creature. This both takes form and color related to the people who meet us, the weather on that specific day, our biological rhythms, our biological ability I found, as the sheep physically haven't been uses to walking for this long for example, without resting.

I am also exposed, with my body, because even if I am covered by this woollen shell, my face is bare, and I tell you, in October close to Isenvad (Danish village) which is the coldest place in Denmark, it get's really really cold.

So you can say, this is part of what we have had in common, a sort of bodily vulnerability towards those circumstances we have been placed in.

M: How is it... You talk about this rubbing off, we also talked about it outside... How can you feel that you have affected each other?

C: Yeah.... How I can feel it... I register some changes in the interplay between us, all the way down to her feeling more safe together with me, she comes faster to meet me, she lies down in my presence. When that happened for the first time, we had been walking together for a week, and then she lied down at the end of harness. That was a bit of a victory, I thought, either she is very very tired or she feels very very safe with me being in the other end. Usually sheep don't lie down when there are people around.

On the other hand, I can feel a fragility in my will. My will has crumbled a bit on the way. Partly because I have experienced my and her interplay, her needs, and I have felt my needs in relation to her on the way. This has changed qualitatively. Personally, I feel that I sense more now. Normally I live in Copenhagen and walk here in Ikast 5 days a week and I noticed I could smell Copenhagen in a very new way, smell the gasoline in my street in a very other way that I usually do. Its like my senses unfold being with her, her way of being in the world rubs off at me. She discovers when people are approaching 1 kilometer away. She registers when the leaves of the trees flutter in the wind. So this sort of world reading I have activated in myself, I do have it. I think, we as humans have it. We are just used to living in the world in other ways, and we use if not other senses, then other ways to navigate.

In this way, it is a gift to take on another skin and be in the world in another way. At least for a time being.

M: How do you think your way of being and behaving have rubbed off at her?

C: Well, overall we can discuss if she has become a little more human and I have become a little more non-human. But those categories I also feel like throwing away. It is almost a degrading saying that she has become more humanized. I don't think that is what happens in the interplay. I think, that right now we are exploring a form of life which is neither, but a hybrid, where she appropriates some ways of moving, some ways of communicating, which are different from if she had been together with another non-human animal, I think. I can see she reacts in a certain way towards dogs, when she meets them, where she makes her marking behavior (by stiff and alert bodily position facing the dogs). However, it is as if the communication between us has developed to a strange sort of hybrid being some Third. At least a form of communication I don't know of and which she most likely doesn't know either.

M: There was something interesting you said out there, that I want to explore a bit more, again to look beyond 'the woman and the sheep' which some have difficulties to do. You mentioned that Jomfru Rist was a social heritage breaker, can you elaborate on how these thoughts influence what you are doing now?

C: Yes. In this project, I have been very conscious about being an artist with a female body and that I cooperate with an animal with a female body. We are two 'she' creatures, in some way. And then I can't help spinning the fact into the story, that female animals at all times have been categorized as secondary as opposed to the primary white male animal which have set the measuring stick within scientific and societal formation in the history of mankind (or humankind!). Within this context, the fact that her

name is No.2, symbolizes or captures very fine that if we are to try to move beyond the usual human centeredness, we have to explore relations with some of the Others, that is animals, non-human animals, that is, maybe women, we already do that in the Nordic countries but we don't do that in the whole world. Still there are countries where women don't have a voice, one could say. It could be other races. That is, taking part in this debate about how we make the Others ourselves. How can we become better at living in a way where we don't automatically set ourselves as the golden measuring stick. We also have to work with this artistically, I think. And we have to think all the way through, which I have found some of the most challenging in this project, how to avoid repeating the story about the woman walking the heath with a sheep, or the female artist walking the heath with a sheep. This becomes a re-enactment of: Here is a female animal and an animal, and what they do is something weird and hard to understand. It doesn't fit some normative measuring stick.

M: I fell upon something.. It is a bit chaotic this interview, I didn't write something down beforehand, it is a part of a new way of working for me. You say that we should stop, or not use ourselves as a golden measuring stick. Why is it important to focus on?

C: It is, I think, because I am very occupied with, and melancholic and sad about the state of the world. No less! I think, now I have lived for, I am 46 years old, I have lived my whole life... In the 80's we were afraid of nuclear war, then 9/11 came and now the climate runs amok. It is as if mankind simply hasn't been able to convince me about its intelligence, this is what I think. Therefore, I think, the only way we can survive this development as human animals is absolutely to do something else than we have done so far. I think, we have to move away from a human measure stick, human quality criteria, humanist criteria for right and wrong, because I simply feel that the development of society and the world shows that it is simply not good enough. It is too short-term. In some way, we don't acknowledge the animal in us. We don't acknowledge that we are such small lemmings who don't raise good questions about if this is the way it should be done, or don't raise questions about all of us being on the way over the edge. Nobody halts! We just hurry down the cleft. It is my tiny and hopeful attempt to suggest other ways of being in the world. Or, other ways of exploring how to be in the world as a human – and as an artist, who not only reproduces this measuring stick and model of the sublime human being. I really don't think that ... it is not a measuring stick I believe in!

M: I come to think.. Now we have been walking out there with the sheep, and the sheep is called No. 2. It is stated in the earmark, it, or, she, has. But now I did it. I said 'it'. And that is precisely what my question is about. Can one create an identity for an animal? I mean, when you walk so much with her, you create some sort of identity or is it herself doing it, or how does it relate?

C:Mmm, maybe I don't quite understand what you mean by identity?

M: Identity.. I just mean..

C: Do you mean personality or?

M: Yeah.. Can animals have personality? Or can one give it a personality in the way we perceive it?

C: A lot of questions all at once.. But I do think animals can have individual traits to circumvent whether they have a personality or not. I think, this is again the human way of perceiving, it is the human measuring stick being active: well, do they have it or don't they have it? Do they have a personality as we know it or do they have something else? If we now try to circumvent this, by saying... I think.. Every living creature has, I guess, individual traits, due to its genes and DNA, its surroundings while growing up. I also think all living creatures react upon the surroundings which means that it enters

interaction and react by either feeling comfortable with what encounters it or uncomfortable. So, I don't want to go into whether she has a personality. For sure, I can see that I attribute intentions to her, on the way, but I actually try to, with my own body, just to register what she does. For example when she stands up for a longer period, the head is nearer and nearer to the ground, one can almost see the legs warping underneath her, when I then feel in my body, okay we have been standing for 4 hours, I can identify (relate to) a bodily feebleness. It is at this level... It is more a bodily communication we are involved in rather than a psychological dialogue. We don't have that. But.. We have some sort of consciousness exchange. And yes. I will claim that sheep have consciousness!.. But I don't want to go into what type of consciousness (I smile)..

M: No, no. But how does it show, when you are out there..

C: I is for example when we walk a bit down the heath road, and we both know that it is away from the farm.. I know that at some point she really wants to turn around and just pull me and go home.. She doesn't do it but it is as if it is some kind of cease-fire. She and I tolerate a sort of in between, where she somehow accepts that I want to go another way but if she sees a chance, she walks very slowly, turns around slowly, as if pretending that she is not going home, because I then just might believe that she is going to eat some grass.. And then she turns around – and begins to pull! I just find it so funny, because it is such a well-chosen maneuver – as she is almost able to pull me home by doing it. Can you follow me? It is as if she regulates her intention in relation to my will in a very subtle way. There is a bit of give and take and a bit player over it. Intuition, I guess it is. If she does something slowly, then she might be able to allure me to go with her!

M: Yeah, as you say it is a reading of body signals.. So when you walk out there, you understand her better and we have to see ourselves as not totally perfect subjects, but how is it that I and other people not being so lucky to do what you do, how are we to use what you are doing now in our daily life?

C: Yeah.. Again, I'd like to begin somewhere else. I ended up calling the project Becoming Sheep and that is actually an abbreviation as it was the easiest to say, compared to my working title, which was "Becoming With Sheep – figuration with sheep". And this long title I find captures much better, that it is not about that I am going sheep. It is about placing myself in a situation on the border of my human capability or my present human habitus and then explore what happens.. over time.. in such a situation. And where it has seemed to make meaning for the other visitors having been out on the heath, it has precisely been meeting a human and an animal in a new form of interplay. They both ask me a lot: Oh, are you going here for 5 weeks? And: Did you now bring a sandwich? And: Didn't you bring rain clothes if it starts to rain? Intuitively and bodily, they recognize or read my exposedness. I think this is some of what people gets from the project and then I have reached a part of the intention of the project by suggesting, what if we as human beings expose (udsætte in Danish is both expose and to place one outside) ourselves in a different way in the world. It is really physical – ex-pose ourselves in another way in the world, place ourselves out of, do something different, have something at stake.

I might have pneumonia, I have very severe asthma, I use medication 24 hours a day. It is not the most obvious project to walk outside in October in a woolen suit, which is thick but where the wind go right through. So in a way, it is like making a proto type or a model, a relational model of how one also can be in the world.

M: To get it straight, what you want to achieve with your project, if I have to say it short and journalist like in one sentence, it is creating more understanding of difference, or?

C: No..

M: No?

C: No.. I'd rather say, more understanding of similarity (in Danish 'lighed' both means similarity and equality)!

M: Similarity? Okay.. Yeah, that's right, that is not the same.

C: No, it is catchier to say difference but it actually isn't what I...

M: It is similarity? I can see that clearly. It falls into place. More understanding for similarity?

C: yeah.. I just have to think through whether it tastes right.. Yes.. We talked earlier about – and with you I developed the idea, that it is also about giving myself another 'pre-sign' (in Danish 'fortegn' means something that stand in front of, an indicator, like +1 or -1), And now I reflect upon what similarity has do with a different pre-sign.. Well, the intention is more understanding of the similarity of all living creatures and the means is through trying to shift pre-sign by wearing a rather androgyny suit and connecting physically with a sheep. Those are means to the ambition of making people see interrelations and precisely, not difference.

M: I think I have what I need, but you mention it yourself, I don't want to take the honor of knowing what is happening all around, art and performance art is made with animals. Here there is a sheep and in Aarhus (Danish town) there is something with ants.. Why do we see, maybe it is too strong to call it a wave, but we see a movement toward performance art with animals. Why is that?

C: I don't know, but I think it is an exciting development, from.. in Denmark we have had Bjørn Nørgaard (artist) who slaughtered a horse, there has been stuffed puppies (by Danish artist Michael Brammer), there has been gold fish in a blender (by Marco Evaristti).. There has been a series of works that exposed human dominance over animals... To these years' many collaborations with animals in contemporary art. I find that interesting. And I think that it relates to the thoughts I have done on... Many contemporary artists are occupied with the current climate crisis in the world, or economic crisis, or refugee crisis, which makes us have to think differently. And I think, that some of us think, let us try not to run the dominance model towards animals, but let's try do make collaborations.

Simply to open our eye to the potentials - and the resources, not denying, like the ants in the Kunsthall Aarhus they are fantastically good at constructing, navigating and... Of course there is a desire to learn from the other living creatures, and not only see them as prey or food or food-producing animal, but spot the potentials they have - but also - which we get in the interplay with them. So I think it is a part of this reaction, and a sort of state of alert having been activated in our current era. Yeah...

M: Super!

C: Interesting!